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ABSTRACT

Noting that current students will become citizens of the Information Age, and that much of their social and professional success will depend on their speaking and listening skills, this paper supports the call for required courses in oral communication and proposes components of successful oral communication programs. The introduction describes the current lack of speaking and listening instruction in American schools, and defines five functions of language: controlling, feeling, informing, ritualizing, and imagining. The second section deals with the need for oral communication skills in society, pointing out that oral skills are vital for success in many careers from police work to corporate board rooms, and that oral communication training can also be of benefit at home. The inadequacy of current high school students' oral communication training is highlighted in the third section, while the fourth section recommends practices and behavioral objectives for an overall oral communication program within the categories of (1) specific communication competence skills, (2) awareness of when standard and nonstandard English are appropriate, (3) key curriculum guidelines, (4) ideal learning environment, and (5) teacher training requirements. In the fifth section, characteristics of a strong oral communication program are enumerated, and it is stressed that oral skills activities must be part of the curriculum, appropriate for grade level, reinforced by teachers, and reinforced outside of class as well. Following the conclusion is a 13-item annotated bibliography of oral and listening skills resources. (SKC)

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Language Arts

Concept Paper

Oregon Department of Education

Number 1

Oral Communication

INTRODUCTION

Today's students will be tomorrow's citizens of the Information Age, and much of their personal, social, and professional success will depend on their speaking and listening skills. Our new literacy will require instruction in oral communication.

Of all the basic skills, speaking and listening are the most neglected in the school curriculum. This neglect may derive from a failure to hold teachers accountable for student achievement in oral communication skills, a lack of teacher training in communication education, inadequate teaching materials, or the failure to develop clear curriculum goals with a detailed scope and sequence.

Many school districts have yet to see the value of requiring speaking and listening courses. Reading and writing dominate language arts classrooms. A comprehensive survey in the late 1970's suggested that only 25 percent of American secondary students were required to take a speech course (Friedrich, 1981). Even fewer students receive listening training.

Practical oral communication instruction should be experiential, participatory, and based on a taxonomy of communication functions common to everyday experiences in education, work, play, family life, and social interaction.

Five Functions of Language

The five functions of communication provide a basis from which to analyze and plan instruction (Allen and Brown, 1976).

1. **Controlling:** In this function, the participants' primary purpose is to control behavior such as commanding, offering, suggesting, threatening, warning, prohibiting, refusing, justifying, persuading, and arguing.
2. **Feeling:** In this function, the participants' primary purpose is to express feelings and attitudes as an affective response, such as exclaiming, expressing a state or attitude, taunting, commiserating, sympathizing, tale-telling, supporting, and blaming.
3. **Informing:** In this function the participants' purpose is to offer or seek information, such as stating information, questioning, answering, justifying, naming, pointing out an object, demonstrating, and acknowledging.
4. **Ritualizing:** This function of communication serves primarily to maintain social relationships and to facilitate social interaction, such as greeting, taking leave, participating in verbal games, reciting, taking turns in conversation, participating in culturally appropriate modes of speech, and demonstrating culturally appropriate amenities.
5. **Imagining:** This function of communication casts the participants in imaginary situations such as role-playing, fantasizing, speculating, dramatizing, theorizing, and storytelling.

NEED FOR ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The federal government and many states, including Oregon, recognize speaking and listening as essential skills. In 1978, the federal Basic Skills Proficiency Act included oral communication — speaking and listening — as basic skills.

Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, noted that even though our culture is more oral than written, "the spoken word — rhetoric — is the most neglected area in English courses throughout the nation." Boyer pointed out that, "Talk is everywhere. We use the telephone more frequently than we send letters. Throughout our lives we judge others and are judged by what is

said." He concluded that, "We need to be as precise in speaking as we are in writing." (*Christian Science Monitor*, January 27, 1984).

Contemporary education reform movements believe that oral communication instruction is fundamental to true literacy. A 1979 survey by the Speech Communication Association to determine what "basic" skills should encompass, found that 22 professional organizations recommended that oral communication be an integral part of every child's education (Cooper, 1985). The Paideia Group and the National Commission on Excellence in Education include oral communication instruction in their ideal school curricula. The College Board's list of Basic Academic Competencies includes reading, writing, speaking and listening, mathematics, reasoning and studying. These same skills are reflected in Oregon's Essential Learning Skills and provide a link across disciplines of knowledge although they are not specific to any particular discipline. The clamor for instruction in oral communication echoes the need for speaking and listening skills in the work place.

A 1983 survey reported in *On Campus* (AFT, September 1984) of 500 training, personnel, and public affairs officers discovered an alarming concern about high school graduates' preparation for the world of work. Over 60 percent of the executives believed that reading, writing, and communication skills of high school graduates had declined. In a University of Colorado study (*USA Today*, June 9, 1983) of the relationship of skills taught in high school to skills needed by employees, students said that math, English, business, and speech courses helped them the most. At the same time, employers identified problems in the same areas: computation, sentence structure, and oral communication.

College graduates have identified oral communication skills as essential for success in their careers. In a 1982 study, faculty, employers, and recent graduates responded to this questionnaire item: "If you marked any of the electives 'didn't take it,' which ones do you think now would have helped you in your life since graduation?" The total of alumni choices follow in order of preference: Public Speaking — 290; Business English — 253; Creative Writing — 166; Journalism — 133; Scientific Writing — 130. The author concluded that college alumni are aware that "spoken communication is more important than the written word in life outside academia — a reality that most English teachers prefer to overlook" (Hetherington, 1982).

From the police beat to the board room, effective communication skills are essential. One study found that police officers spend 72 percent of

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their time working with others through public speaking, listening, interviewing, and interpersonal communication (Erickson, *Communication Education*, 25, 1976). In another study, personnel officers from 250 of the largest corporations listed by *Fortune* said they expect employees to be skilled in public speaking, listening, and group discussion (Applebaum and Anatol, *Effective Oral Communications for*

Business and the Professions, SCA, 1982). More and more American businesses are requiring oral communication training for their employees.

Corporations as diverse as Celestial Seasoning, Inc. (herbal teas) and Sperry Corporation (business equipment) require employees to take listening training. It is not uncommon for organizations in the public and private sectors to pay up to $1,500 for an employee to attend an intensive, three-day public speaking workshop.

The need for communication skills is not confined to the workplace. In school and at home, students are expected by teachers, parents, and peers to communicate effectively. Much of a student's school day is spent listening to instructions or lectures, answering questions, giving oral reports, participating in class discussion, and talking with classmates. As a matter of fact, research studies indicate that of the total time devoted to communication, 45 percent is spent in listening, 30 percent in speaking, 16 percent in reading, and 9 percent in writing. Additionally, nearly 60 percent of an elementary student's day is spent in listening (Strother, 1987). Part of a student's course grade is often based on class participation. At home, a sign of a healthy family climate is clear, open, caring communication between parents and children. The invasion of our living and family rooms by television has placed a premium on critical, evaluative listening skills. As of 1985, American children watched television an average of 27 hours per week; their teenage brothers and sisters averaged 23 hours per week.

The school program must provide class time for systematic instruction at all grade levels in oral communication skills such as critical listening, planning and presenting message, giving and receiving constructive feedback, and nonverbal communication.

Oral communication in our society is ubiquitous. At school, at work, and at home, speaking and listening play central roles in our lives. English language arts curricula must reflect this reality and deliver unified instruction in communication skills at all grade levels.

CURRENT PRACTICES

Oral communication includes the broad skills of speaking and listening. A common misconception is that because students come to school with basic abilities to make themselves heard and to understand others, they need no further instruction in speaking and listening. Yet despite entering the ninth grade with years of speaking and listening experience, the typical high school freshman is virtually unable to prepare and deliver a brief, coherent speech to his or her classmates. Study after study shows that the listening ability of America's students is woefully inadequate. In general, the American public identifies public speaking with fear and listening with passivity.

This reticence and low level of oral communication competence can be traced in part to elementary and secondary classrooms which emphasize passive, non-oral modes of instruction.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

The overall program for oral communication instruction must provide a wide range of speaking and listening experiences (Cooper, 1985).

- a range of situations (formal to informal, interpersonal to mass communication).
- a range of purposes (informing, persuading, imagining, etc.).
- a range of audiences (classmates, teachers, community, friends, etc.).
- a range of forms (conversations, discussions, drama, public speaking, etc.).
- a range of speaking styles (impromptu, extemporaneous, oral reading, etc.).

The school program must provide class time for systematic instruction at all grade levels in oral communication skills, such as critical listening, planning and presenting messages, giving and receiving constructive feedback, and nonverbal communication (Cooper, 1985).

Communication Competence

Four specific skills provide a basis for determining competence in communication (Wood, 1977). Instruction and practice in each skill area is needed to develop the ability to communicate effectively.

- First, students must acquire a broad range of communication skills which they can use in specific situations. Listening, public speaking, large and small group discussions, and interpersonal communication call for a diversity of communication skills.

- Second, communication competence implies the ability to use a set of criteria to determine which skills are appropriate for a particular situation. Students must be able to assess the topic, task, listeners, and setting in planning and participating in communication.

- Third, students must be given daily practice in verbal and nonverbal strategies and must have specific feedback about their progress. Frequent exercises in group discussion, role playing, interpersonal communication, reading aloud, storytelling, debating, and other forms of oral communication will develop competence. Instruction in types of listening — for information, for appreciation, and for evaluation — will foster listening competence.

- Fourth, students must learn how to assess oral communication and adapt accordingly.

They are conscious of listeners and setting; they choose appropriate verbal and nonverbal feedback; they evaluate the effects of their messages. They recognize that speaking and listening, like reading and writing, are skills to be learned and refined.

Students also need an understanding of messages sent and received through nonverbal communication. Nonverbal messages involve facial expressions, eye contact, touching, tone of voice, dress, posture, and space between individuals. Communication skills are enhanced as students learn to interpret nonverbal behaviors and to adjust their own nonverbal signals to reflect the intended messages.

Standard vs. Nonstandard English

In any program of oral communication instruction, the debate over standard versus nonstandard English must be addressed. Numerous professional groups, including the National Council of Teachers of English, the Speech Communication Association, and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, have issued statements supporting the student's right to his or her own language. Research studies, however, indicate that teachers tend to view nonstandard usage as sloppy and ineffective

Was the communication appropriate to the situation and purpose? Did I accomplish my purpose? How can I adapt my communication to a particular audience? Was the communication experience satisfying?

Oral communication competency, then, is more than being able to "give a talk." Orally literate students can speak and listen effectively in interpersonal, small group, and public situations.

and that teachers' expectations and evaluations of a speaker reflect a negative attitude toward nonstandard speech patterns (Cooper and Stewart, 1982).

One approach to instruction in communication skills is to develop among students an interest in and curiosity about the diversity of language. In this arena, standard and nonstandard expressions can be examined without the labeling of "bad" or "wrong." The pertinent issues then

become the appropriateness to particular situations and audiences, and the ability of the speaker to select from several language options.

Oral communication instruction requires a shift from a teacher-dominated, quiet, passive classroom atmosphere to a situation in which students are more verbally and physically active.

Four Curriculum Guidelines

The Speech Communication Association issued guidelines for essential skills in speaking and listening, noting four key concepts around which an oral communication curriculum should be organized. Children should:

1. Employ spoken language and nonverbal behavior in order to communicate meaning.
2. Communicate for a purpose.
3. Interact in situations ranging from informal one-to-one conversations to formal large-group settings.
4. Analyze, respond to, and evaluate spoken messages.

Learning Environment

These skills will be best learned in a school setting which includes skilled teachers, oral communication instruction in English language arts classes and across the curriculum, and a program of extracurricular activities for improving speaking and listening.

In order for any of the recommended practices to take place, teachers and administrators may have to alter their views of what constitutes an effective learning environment. By its very nature, oral communication instruction requires a shift from a teacher-dominated, quiet, passive classroom atmosphere to a situation in which students are more verbally and physically active and where they may help to direct the development of the lesson.

Teacher Training Requirements

Ideally, English language arts teachers will have preservice training in oral communication. Teachers in grades prekindergarten through six should be well-versed in children's acquisition of language, the development of speaking and listening skills and the relationships between speaking and writing. At higher levels, teachers must understand interpersonal communication, group discussion, public speaking and listening.

Teachers at all grade levels need to understand the centrality of message content to oral communication. They can then help students develop respect for the meaning of what they say — for vocabulary choice, grammar, syntax, organization of ideas, the use of examples to clarify and evidence to prove — for the ability to make thoughts clear to others.

Teachers model oral communication skills for their students every day — while lecturing, asking and answering questions, conducting class discussions, interviewing, and participating in meetings with students, administrators, and parents. Teachers who communicate effectively exert a powerful influence on students' attitudes about and practice of oral communication.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A STRONG ORAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

1. From prekindergarten through grade 12, oral communication instruction must be a recognized part of the English language arts curriculum. A sound oral communication program should be designed to develop communication skills beginning with simple activities (sharing an experience, storytelling, making a social introduction, accurately following simple directions) and progressing to more complex skills (giving an informative speech, orally interpreting literature, leading a group discussion, debating, and distinguishing between informative and persuasive messages).
2. It is important that instructional activities be matched to appropriate levels of cognitive

and skill development; forcing inexperienced third graders into a stressful public speaking situation may permanently plant the seeds of stage fright. But helping them develop a repertoire of increasingly sophisticated speaking and listening skills over the years will result in high school graduates who willingly and confidently accept a public speaking assignment.

Teacher expectations have a tremendous impact on student's language acquisition and their willingness to attempt various communications.

3. Teacher expectations have a tremendous impact on students' language acquisition and their willingness to attempt various communications. When children are encouraged to communicate, their skills are enhanced. When communication activities take place in real-world contexts, student involvement increases, and the door is opened to make many classroom events into language-rich experiences.

4. It is important for students at all grade levels to receive feedback on the effectiveness of their speaking and listening skills. Feedback should be specific rather than general and is most helpful if it includes suggestions to correct problems. As with other skill areas, students are more likely to show improvement in response to positive reinforcement for the things they do correctly rather than focusing on errors or inadequacies. The more immediate the feedback, the more effective it will be in most cases. Feedback about communication skills, especially, should focus on the behavior rather than on the individual (Cooper and Stewart, 1982).

5. Oral communication skills can also be reinforced outside the curriculum. At lower grades, after-school activities such as plays, story hours, and book clubs provide opportunities for oral communication. In upper grades an active, well-coached speech team involves students in competitive and educational speaking. Drama and readers' theater provide another domain in which to improve speaker skill and confidence. A student speaker's bureau lets students experience "real world" public speaking by planning and presenting programs to community groups. Well-organized extracurricular activities in oral communication reinforce classroom learning, let students represent their schools, enrich the culture of the community through educational theater, and provide community groups with programs of public interest.

CONCLUSION

The Information Age and its accompanying technology will bring people together with an unprecedented need to share, interpret, and evaluate ideas. The ability to communicate well will be at a premium in the future. We owe it to our children to ensure that speaking and listening instruction are a fundamental part of a strong language arts curriculum at all grade levels. Teachers and curriculum specialists must examine resources to determine specific oral communication skills to be taught and design scope and sequence documents at grades prekindergarten through 12. Efforts must be made to ensure necessary staff development opportunities and to identify and share strategies and materials which provide effective instruction in a variety of oral communication skills.

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Wood, Barbara S., ed. *Developing Functional Communication Competencies: Grades 7-12*. Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1977.

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The review of research and initial draft of this paper was done by Dr. Robert Wertz, chairman, Humanities Division, Western Oregon State College. The paper was revised to reflect comments from Oregon educators and published by the Department of Education.

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